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A cleaning solution for mess left by meth labs

Bill would give EPA \$18 million to devise a way to make potentially deadly sites safe

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WASHINGTON - When police in Houston and across the country bust methamphetamine labs in living rooms, motel rooms and even the back seats of cars, local agencies are often left to clean up the deadly mess that includes poisonous gases, cancer-causing chemicals and flammable solvents.

Now, the House Science Committee, with three members who represent part of the Houston area, where dozens of meth labs are destroyed every year, is putting on the legislative fast track a bill to make the dangerous remediation work much safer.

The measure, expected to get committee approval today, would give the Environmental Protection Agency \$18 million for four years to develop guidelines for states on how to clean up meth labs.

The bill also would require the government to develop testing kits that could identify meth residue and direct the National Academy of Sciences to study the long-term health and environmental effects of the labs.

"People are beginning to realize the dimensions of the problem," said committee Chairman Sherwood Boehlert, a Republican from a part of upstate New York where more than a dozen labs for manufacturing the ruinous street drug were discovered last year. "It's universal."

The committee includes Houston Democrats Sheila Jackson Lee and Al Green and Republican Michael McCaul of Austin, who represents Katy and surrounding neighborhoods. All were expected to back the bill today.

"We are long overdue in getting our hands around this at a national level," Jackson Lee said. "This legislation can save lives."

What's left behind

RESOURCES

METH-LAB BUSTS

There were about 16,000 meth-lab raids in the United States in 2004, including:

- **Texas:** 325
- **Harris County:** 18
- **Montgomery County:** 17
- **Brazoria County:** 4
- **Liberty County:** 3

Source: Drug Enforcement Administration's El Paso Intelligence Center

The byproducts of meth cooking can include deadly phosphine gas and various cancer-causing chemicals.

"Just the collection of the evidence can kill you," said Lt. Philip Cash of the narcotics division of the Montgomery County sheriff's special investigations unit. "We have also had instances where neighbors had ammonia poisoning from a meth cook" in a nearby home.

The chemicals can remain on walls, in carpet and on surfaces as long as six months after the last manufacture, said John Martyny of Denver, a National Jewish Medical and Research Center professor who has worked with government agencies to research meth-lab problems. "Almost anyone in the vicinity of the cook will test positive for methamphetamine, even infants," said Martyny, who testified to the Science Committee this month.

Sgt. Joe Millhouse of the Texas Department of Public Safety works with the Houston-based Methamphetamine Initiative Group, which covers the Texas coastal region.

"The fumes hang low to the ground, so if there are children present, as there are on numerous occasions, the kids are getting more of the effects of the chemicals," he said.

Putting others at risk

Millhouse once saw two children in a meth-contaminated home; one was mentally retarded, he said, and the other had developed a tumor on her head from exposure to the toxic environment.

Meth producers sometimes dump chemical waste into sewers, on farmland or even down toilets in rest-stop bathrooms, putting entire communities at risk, said Scott Burns, deputy director for state and local affairs at the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy.

The federal law is needed, experts said, because only seven states have regulations for the cleanup of meth labs, and those rules are not uniform. Texas has no state guidelines.

Methamphetamine labs are often built in homes and similar locations with easily obtained chemicals, manufacturing equipment and instructions.

The drug can be made with household items such as glassware, hoses, a heat source and old coffee filters. Ingredients include antifreeze, ether, the fertilizer component anhydrous ammonia, hydrogen chloride gas, highly flammable solvents and ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, the active ingredients in over-the-counter cold medicines.

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